

Modern Primitives

BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON

How Widespread Are the Instincts of the Cave Woman?

MARGORY CHESTER was twenty, she was excitingly pretty, she had a handsome and industrious young husband and a beautiful baby. True, her income was small, but in San Francisco money matters nothing if not "belonged."

When Margory married she did what more than one girl of her set had done—she took a flat in San Francisco and was her own cook and housemaid. Her husband was not yet a junior partner in his uncle's large importing and exporting business, but there was no doubt of his quality, and he had never been wild.

As efficiency was the keynote of Margory's character, she soon became an expert cook, and not only fed her husband satisfactorily, but their friends at numerous little dinners, beautifully appointed with the wedding presents and her own good taste. An itinerant Jap waited on the table.

She was passionately domestic, and preferred to sew for the baby or herself while Morgan smoked a pipe and read novels aloud in the evening.

Of course she had a car. Mr. Harborough, Morgan's uncle, had given her a coupe for a wedding present. In the morning, after her housework was over, she took the nurse and baby for a drive through the Golden Gate Park, the woods of the Presidio, along the beach or around Twin Peaks.

During those afternoons which her admirable housekeeping left quite free she drove about to see her friends or took tea with them at the Town and Country Club or in the court of the Palace Hotel. The summer she spent at her father's place in the country, and Morgan commuted. Free of all house duties, she took part in the quiet life of Menlo Park or the gay life of Burlingame.

Ella Covington, who was still a bad cook, said to her one day: "You are altogether too lucky, Margory. It can't last."

And Bessie Carroll, whose looks had faded, remarked upon another occasion: "Life is not all roses, you know. Seems to me you'll find a thorn one of these days. Stands to reason."

Margory merely smiled at these sallies and tilted her charming little head.

Several months later, when Margory and Bessie were sitting in a corner of the broad veranda at Menlo, sewing, Bessie said abruptly: "Margory, what would you do if—things didn't go on coming your way? Everything is lovely now, but things don't last, you know."

Margory played with a needle. "We make our own lives. Of course, we cannot prevent death, and if there should be a red revolution I couldn't help that, either. But within limits—"

Margory's keen, gray eyes contracted to a sharp point as she watched Margory contentedly stitching. She wondered how well she knew this friend who had been the most popular girl of her set even during their school days.

Margory could not be tabulated as clever. But versatile! Yes, a girl who could dance like a seraph and make a bed like a hospital nurse, who could entertain a roomful and cook to please a man, who was the "best mixer in the bunch" and made frocks that might have come from Paris—yes, Margory might be called versatile!

Bessie stifled a yawn. "The old Spanish grandees left the blessing—or curse—of manana in this valley. I'd take about ten stitches a month if I lived here. What do you think of this Lydia Farren?"

"Lydia Farren?" asked Margory vaguely. "Oh, that New York girl—Mrs. Drummond's niece. I've never thought about her at all."

"But she's frightfully good-looking—and smart. Of course, she seems a lot older than we do, but she's really only twenty-two. And a winner. The men have fallen for her hard. Regular siren—too much class about her for a vamp. I met her at a house party last week, and she asked a lot of questions about you."

"Did she? Morgan liked her. I remember now."

Mrs. Carroll opened her mouth, then closed it firmly, as if nobly resisting a too-fertile temptation. "Of course, you'll go to Lydia's luncheon. She's asked about forty people, and I've an idea it's given for Lydia Farren. Sunday luncheons are a godsend when the men off duty aren't in town and Mrs. Van Tibury and Clara's got the best cook on the peninsula. I suppose we'll all play mah jong afterward, worse luck. I hate games."

"I adore mah jong!" cried Margory. "Morgan and I play every night. He's felt too tired to talk lately, and we don't either of us care to read in summer, so mah jong suits us down to the ground. I tell you, he's a born gambler and doesn't know it."

"Hmm," said Bessie. "No, I never should have said that. He's too—well, impulsive, ardent—for her sanity. It's just as well. I wonder if she's really as good as she looks. I could imagine him gambling deliberately with life. Could you?"

Margory's eyes looked very wise and very innocent as she raised them to her friend's speculative gaze.

"What do we know about anybody?" she asked, smiling.

longed to know you better. Couldn't you spend the next week-end with us in Menlo?"

"Thanks," said Margory. "Delighted, if my aunt has nothing on."

She was a tall, thin girl, with a mass of heavy black hair and oval light-blue eyes—eyes whose long black lashes gave them the effect of still pools brooding over by weeping willows. She wore filmy black, and her white skin was in dazzling contrast to her hair and frock. She clasped her hands and her manner was abrupt, but her voice was deep and rather husky.

"Heard a lot about you, too—from—Mrs. Carroll. Ah! There's Mr. Chester."

She met him more than half way. "Hoped you'd be here. Lead me to a glass of water, will you? I'm perspiring." And she steered him to the next room.

Margory raised her eyebrows. She was critical of manners. The luncheon was served at four round tables in the lofty dining room. Clara had placed Miss Farren at her own table, but the guest of honor had deliberately changed her seat to the table, beside Morgan Chester.

Margory was the first of her own table, and on her right was Tom Harborough, who had been hopelessly in love with her since her sixteenth birthday.

"Like that Farren girl?" he asked Margory when he finally had her undivided attention. "I can't stand her. She's arrogant, and she hasn't an atom of charm."

"I shouldn't say that," said Margory, smiling. "She's about the most beautiful person I ever saw, and she certainly has vivacity. Morgan finds her interesting. He's been tired out lately, and she's waked him up—"

"Barnard looks at her sharply. But Margory's red mouth was smiling roguishly.

"I believe you've fallen for her yourself," she said.

"Oh—you think that? Well—it's a funny thing to do, but I'm going to tell you. Morgan has taken tea with her at the Palace every day for two weeks. The whole town is talking."

The pink color ebbed from Margory's cheeks. "That—that—cannot be possible. Morgan would have told me. He knows I wouldn't mind in the least if he took tea with a girl every day in the month."

"Hasn't he been coming home on the late train?"

"Yes—he has—but you ought to be ashamed of yourself to give him a ride. He's a married man, and he's somewhere else." She leaned across the table. "What are you all so hilarious about? Tom's been boring me, and I missed it."

Tom relaxed into black and sulky silence.

After luncheon the greater part of the company rushed to the mah-jong tables, but Margory noted that Morgan and Miss Farren sauntered off in the direction of the Japanese garden. Nevertheless, she had never played a better game.

During the drive to Menlo she chattered of the heavenly time she had had, taking no notice whatever of Morgan's nervous silence.

She mapped out her preliminary tactics that night as she sat before her dressing table, brushing her hair and examining herself critically in the glass. "I'd never be looked at in the same room with her. It's my wits against beauty, novelty and the high-bred type of vamp."

THE flat was in perfect order, as neat and shining as a new box of toys. Morgan, who had motored up from Santa Barbara with a friend, would arrive in a few moments. Margory's expression was serene.

A motor passed rapidly in front of the house. Morgan ascended the stairs.

Logic and Margory's surprise. She was regarding him gravely, speculatively.

"What made you feel so suddenly grown-up?" she asked.

"Oh—when I saw you. You're just another woman? I've noticed that men go to men of any old age. Mr. Standish is going on fifty and is making a fool of himself over little Polly the chicken."

Morgan growled. "Certainly not! That's the point! And then he burst out violently: 'I love a woman! And for the first time: A man falls in love—not a boy!'"

"I suppose you'll go on falling in love every two years or so—as you feel more and more mature."

"Margory! You must take me seriously."

Morgan was already in his own bed, not too convincingly asleep. She put out the light and crept into hers.

MONDAY is the fashionable day for luncheon at the St. Francis Hotel, even in summer, and Margory usually motored up and met several of her friends at a table reserved for them. But this morning she called up Morgan and invited him to lunch with her, and he could do no less than accept.

"I want you to go with me to choose those new curtains," she remarked into the telephone. "I was horribly cheated in the others."

As they were crossing the garden of the St. Francis on their way to the table room, she saw Miss Farren just ahead of her and hastened her steps.

"Whom are you lunching with?" she asked anxiously. "Couldn't you come with us?"

"Only my aunt and some of her friends," Miss Farren colored slightly. Morgan had visibly stiffened. "I hardly think—"

"Oh, she won't mind. Come along. There's Tom over there, and we'll be a party."

She beckoned imperiously to Barnard, who hastened to her side.

"You must have cracked crab and fried California oysters," announced Margory to the New Yorker when they were seated. "Nothing you can get in the east or anywhere else. Of course, Tom and Morgan will have a red steak."

The luncheon was not a success (she had not expected it to be), in spite of her merry and apparently effortless flow. All rose from the table with the sensation of the submerged coming up for air. Mrs. Chester and Miss Farren parted with mutual protestations of pleasure at meeting so opportunely.

Morgan went with his wife to choose the curtains. On the way she spoke warmly of Miss Farren's charms. But when she stole a glance at his face she saw that it was sad and depressed.

Margory drove down to Menlo more slowly than she had habit. She was somewhat bewildered. It could not be that Morgan was seriously attracted to this girl—a man who had been married for only two completely happy years. Morgan! So soon! Her square little chin quivered.

Margory joined an Italian class in San Francisco which met three times a week in the afternoon. On those days she naturally called for Morgan and motored him home. On the afternoon she arrived on the late train with various excuses. He was usually moody, and stole off for long, solitary walks in the evening.

In August he went to Los Angeles on business. On the way he and Margory departed for a motor trip in the north. Margory played tennis at the Country Club, went to numerous luncheons and dances, and was as gay and popular as ever.

Later in the morning Margory wrote that the old college chum, Stanley Mortimer, had asked him to spend a week in Santa Barbara. Margory telegraphed, urging him to go.

A day or two later she read in the paper that during the morning Margory had visited the Stanley Mortimers at Santa Barbara.

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"Impossible. You are exactly like baby, ting of one toy and shrieking for another. You are anything but a woman! But somehow I feel even more mature than you do, and almost as maternal as I feel for Mortimer's."

"He swore and sprang to his feet. 'You've got to see things straight, and you've got to give me a divorce. I want to marry Lydia Farren!'"

He glared down at the little figure in the chair.

long flight of steps. As he entered and came up the stairs, she ran down to meet him, and flung herself into his arms.

"A month!" she cried. "How did you stand it? I've felt like a widow. I'll never let you go again."

"It's been fearful," he mumbled. "But I'm filthy. Is there time for a bath before dinner?"

"There is not. Wash your face and come right away. I'm off to serve up."

Morgan barely touched his food, hardly raised his eyes from his plate. Margory chattered brightly, and told several anecdotes of the developing wonders of Morgan junior, but even these brought only a vague smile and response.

After dinner she washed up and Morgan retired to the living room to smoke the pipe with a piece of needlework. He threw himself into a chair.

"I've got something to say to you," he announced, his voice harsh and abrupt.

"Yes?" asked Margory sympathetically. "Business again? I've noticed you looked rather worried."

"No. It's worse—much worse. I—I don't know how to say it."

"You haven't been speculating with the firm's money?" asked his wife anxiously.

"How can you say such a thing?" He looked astonished and outraged.

"Of course, I don't really mean it. I know you're the soul of honor. But somehow that's what a woman naturally thinks of in this old town, at least—when her husband comes home looking tragic."

"Well, I haven't. Honorable—I don't know what I've got to say will sound very honorable to you, but it's the plain truth as you are now. One may be innocent and trusting, so sweetly concerned."

"It's this—I want you to get a divorce."

"Morgan Chester?" Margory looked as if the floor had risen and bounced her upright. Then she laughed. "You never were very good at jokes, Morgan, dear, and I must say that was a rather heavy one. Try again."

"I mean it," he said desperately. "Margory permitted her face to become serious."

"But why? What's wrong? If I haven't made you happy and comfortable, and married for two years and more, you should have pointed out my faults. I'm very adaptable."

"You've made me perfectly happy. But it was a boy and girl affair. I am a boy no longer."

"Oh—yes, as much of a man two years ago as you are now. One may be a boy when he goes to war, but after two years of it he comes back a man, unless he's a moron. I wouldn't have married you if you had been a boy. I detest boys."

MORGAN looked at her for the first time with displeased surprise. Logic and Margory's surprise.

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HIS BRAIN FLASHED FULLY AWAKE. "WHAT'S THIS MEAN? WHAT AM I DOING ON THIS VESSEL?"

stand she has quite a fortune. Do you propose to live on her? And as for society, even Mrs. Drummond naturally thinks of in this old town, at least—when her husband comes home looking tragic."

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she said. "And you don't know Margory. Leave it to her."

When Lydia Farren moved over to meet Morgan, Margory telephoned to Mr. Harborough and invited him to luncheon. He was an old bachelor, fond of Morgan, his only living relative and his heir, and devoted to Margory and the baby.

Margory gave him a light and delectable luncheon, and told her story in the living room over the coffee.

"I want you to take it calmly," said Margory, "and do what I ask you. Just regard Morgan as a temporary lunatic and help me run this affair."

"Well, what do you want me to do? I'd like to kick him out."

"What I want you now—to do is to have a detective watch him and let me know if he makes any plans to leave California. Then I'll know what to do. Then you'll do a good part of it. I've told mother not to say a word to father about it. He's so peppy that he'd ruin everything."

"Well, count on me," said Mr. Harborough, heartily. "The young rascal—fool! I hope you'll give him a lesson he'll never forget."

"Oh, he'll get his lesson," said Margory coolly.

Margory continued to take the nurse and the baby for the usual morning drive, and visited the downtown shops when necessary. When friends called she talked serenely of the many interests they had in common and invited them to play mah-jong.

It was just seven weeks from that first momentous interview that Morgan burst into her bedroom late one night. She was lying in a nest of pink pillows, reading. He looked haggard and desperate.

"Margory," he said tensely. "I give you one more chance. Will you divorce me?"

His heavy lids drooped again, then flew wide open. The ship was moving swiftly, but there was no sound of machinery, engines.

Groaning, he succeeded in swinging himself out of the berth and staggered to one of the portholes. He pushed the curtain aside and peered out, his eyes blinking at the dazzling sunshine. Then he collapsed on the floor. He was on a sailing vessel.

He dragged himself to his feet after a time with a dull desire for comfort—the pillows were unusually soft, even for a liner—he fell asleep.

When he awoke he was aware that some one was in the room—standing beside him—holding an ice bag on his head. He turned his head slightly and glanced up. Margory was looking down at him anxiously.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked.

Her voice sounded very soft and sweet—an abrupt clipped voice would have tortured his nerves. Margory was a woman in some ways.

His brain flashed, fully awake. He pushed aside her hand and sat up, clutching the curtain.

"What's this mean?" he cried furiously. "What am I doing on this sailing vessel? My word! I've been shanghaied!"

"Nonsense. Lie down and I'll tell you all about it."

She forced him back gently and replaced the ice bag firmly on his head. "You have been very ill! See how in the smooth, practical tones of a nurse. 'You broke down, had a collapse, and the doctor said the best thing was to get you on a sailing vessel at once. I only agreed when I heard that a Dr. Merle was to sail on the same ship for rest. All you really have to do is to lie here quietly until you are able to get on deck